

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 230

CS 210 459

AUTHOR Peckham, Irvin
TITLE Statewide Direct Writing Assessment in California.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Achievement Rating; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; Program Development; *Program Improvement; *State Programs; Teacher Response; *Test Coaching; Test Construction; Test Interpretation; Test Validity; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *California Assessment Program; *Direct Assessment

ABSTRACT

California has provided other states with an example of how not to assess student writing and has initiated a new direction in the statewide assessment of student writing achievement, a direction designed to influence writing instruction positively. Before 1987, the California Assessment Program (CAP) limited English skills assessment to multiple choice items. With the support of State Superintendent Bill Honig, however, CAP administrators have launched the CAP Direct Writing Assessment (CAP-DWA), which reflects the best of what is now known about the writing process from researchers and theorists such as James Britton and James Moffett and directly assesses various types of writing. The program focuses on the most important characteristics necessary to a particular type of writing rather than those that are common to all types of writing. Twenty exemplary writing teachers comprising the CAP Writing Development Team wrote prompts, scoring guides, and writing guides for each type of writing being assessed. After a trial assessment involving 20,000 students, the team successfully used these materials to train readers to score according to selected criteria from three categories: awareness of readers, presentation of problem, and argument for a solution. The CAP encourages school districts to refine their programs by using the teachers from the CAP Writing Development Team as a resource for workshops. It also provides examples of the prompts, makes the scoring guides public, and offers sample essays, commentaries, and reading lists. Thus, the CAP-DWA furnishes districts not only with data indicating students' writing achievement in a particular school, but also with specific information teachers can use to improve that achievement. (Information for ordering the "Writing Assessment Handbook: Grade 8," is included, as is a short bibliography.) (JD)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED281230

Irvin Peckham
P.O. Box 151431
San Diego, CA 92115
Tel. 619/287-7458
School Affiliation: University of
California, San Diego

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Irvin Peckham

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

STATEWIDE DIRECT WRITING ASSESSMENT
IN CALIFORNIA
by
Irvin Peckham

Our students' abilities or inabilities to write has become a national obsession. This has proved a mixed blessing for English teachers: although we have received needed support for our composition courses, we have also been the focus of a flurry of statewide, writing achievement assessments. We have met these assessments with varying degrees of affection according to what they measured and how well their measurements helped or hindered our abilities to teach our students to write. In California, we have provided other states with an example of how they should not assess student writing. We have also initiated an exciting new

CS210459

Peckham--2

direction in statewide assessment practices, a direction that we believe will positively influence classroom instruction.

Before 1987, the California Assessment Program (known in California as CAP) limited the English skills assessment to multiple choice items. A student would generally be given a sample essay within which were several usage, syntactic, and mechanical errors. A typical item would extract a badly written sentence from the sample essay. The student would be offered four possible revisions and he or she would have to guess which revision the test designers thought was most correct. CAP's decision to assess student achievement by this kind of multiple choice test was made to accommodate teachers' concerns about how much time students are expected to devote to statewide tests and to the equally pressing concern of dollars and sense. It's cheap to test objectively, and it costs big bucks to assess students' writing by looking at what they write.

The results of these assessments were released to the public, and teacher accountability was directly related to these results. Teachers, consequently, were placed in uncomfortable positions: we knew that the CAP scores did not truly reflect writing achievement because writing was not what was being assessed; at the same time, we knew that community support came with high test scores, and high test scores would come if we taught our students how to

1. read test passages shrewdly;
3. pseudo-edit test items;
2. guess effectively.

This is not to say that we couldn't get our students to raise their CAP scores by teaching them how to write well. It was merely a question of efficiency--as those of us who do well on tests know. How do you study for a test? You examine as many old tests as you can find, you learn what kinds of questions are asked and what kind of skills are being assessed, and you study those kinds of questions and practice those kinds of skills. We knew that if we wanted to improve student scores and thus prove our accountability, we would take a couple of weeks out from real writing and teach to the test. We would teach the kids the tricks with multiple choice questions, and we would practice with other tests that approximated previous CAP tests. In the meantime, our students wouldn't do what we knew they should do in order to improve their writing skills--they didn't write. They didn't look at their own writing or at the writing of their peers because even peer editing doesn't directly improve the kind of editing skills that were being assessed by CAP. In real editing, you look for errors and awkward structures; in test editing, you compare sentences or phrases, one of which you know is correct.

There were of course some teachers dedicated (some might say obsessively so) to improving their students' writing skills; consequently, they ignored CAP. They continued to have their students write their own compositions, work on them in student writing workshops, rewrite them, and submit them to their teachers for evaluation. And their students became better writers than if they had taken two weeks out of a nine week course to study for CAP.

CAP administrators understood the deleterious effect of their program, but they were doing what they could with the money they had. Now, however, they have gained the support of State Superintendent Bill Honig to launch an ambitious project that will directly assess students' writing. The CAP Direct Writing Assessment will also assess the various types of writing, attacking what James Britton in The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) called the "naive global sense of the ability to write," (1) that is, the conviction that if students can write one thing, they can write anything.

Britton perceived what is at first glance obvious to good English teachers: different kinds of writing require different ways of thinking and composing: Writing a letter to a friend is different from writing a research paper or from writing a newspaper article. Writing a fictional autobiography is different from writing a technical manual, an advertisement, or a TV script. Success in one kind of writing does not guarantee success in another any more than success as a television newscaster guarantees success on Broadway. The gist of Britton's research was that if we want to improve our instruction of composition, we are going to have to broaden our writing assignments so that we teach our students more than the autobiographical incident, the third-person story, and the traditional persuasive essay--most of which are read by the teacher only. Instead, we will have to teach them how to write different types of writing for a variety of purposes and audiences, very much as one is expected to write in life-after-school.

In Teaching the Universe of Discourse, James Moffett has given teachers a theoretical framework within which to teach the many different kinds of writing. His later books, student-centered language arts and reading, k-13, Active Voice, and Active Voices, give teachers a rich array of writing assignments and activities so that their students will be able to range broadly over the universe of discourse. Rather than being paralyzed by the shopworn sentence/paragraph/essay sequence or by formula, thesis-centered writing, students can develop their styles naturally by writing first about themselves and then moving outward to write about others, by writing to friends, classmates, and newspaper editors as well as to their teachers as evaluators, by climbing up and down the ladder that begins with narrative incidents and ends with generalizations supported by logical arguments and specific events.

The CAP Direct Writing Assessment reflects the best of what we now know about the writing process from researchers like Britton and theorists like Moffett. While recognizing the importance of word usage, spelling ability, and mechanical and syntactical correctness, the Direct Writing Assessment focuses on the most important characteristics necessary to a particular type of writing rather than those that are common to all types.

These characteristics have been selected by twenty exemplary California writing teachers who have been working under the direction of Charles Cooper, University of California, San Diego, to write prompts, scoring guides, and writing guides for each type of writing being assessed. The prompts were used in a trial

Peckham--6

assessment involving 20,000 California students who reflected the racial, economic, and geographical diversity of California high schools. The twenty exemplary teachers comprising the CAP Writing Development Team read these essays in order to determine which characteristics were most necessary to successful papers in that type of writing. They wrote scoring guides based on these characteristics and selected anchor papers as examples of the score points. The Writing Development Team then used these scoring guides and anchor papers to train readers how to score according to the selected criteria. The readers were selected from teachers recommended by the California Writing Project to represent as many districts as possible throughout the state. The scoring sessions were located in San Diego, Los Angeles, Berkeley, and Sacramento in order to establish regional scoring centers in the northern, central, and southern sections of the state.

The data collected by the Educational Testing Service, who organized the scoring sessions, showed that the teachers were within one point of agreement with each other on 89% of the 5,907 grade 8 essays used in the ETS reliability study--although the criteria involved in the assessments demanded a good deal of sophistication on the part of the scorers. For example, Problem Solution prompts asked the writers to define a specific problem, propose one or more solutions, and convince the readers to consider the proposed solutions. The criteria for scoring were separated into three categories:

- Awareness of readers: A good essay would demonstrate an awareness of who the writer is trying to convince by making a genuine attempt to accommodate the readers' concerns and possible objections.
- Presentation of the problem: The writer presents the problem in such a way as to invite the readers to share the writer's concern and desire for a solution. The problem is presented coherently and fully.
- Argument for a solution: The writer offers one or more solutions to the problem. The writer convincingly argues for the solutions by carefully sequencing the arguments and using strategies that anticipate possible objections to the solutions.

The teachers had to learn how to score the essays on the basis of these criteria while ignoring other characteristics, such as mechanical correctness or elaboration--features that would be scored using different scoring guides. The training sessions both taught teachers how to score for the CAP Direct Writing Assessment and also functioned as in-service workshops, giving teachers an opportunity to talk about what criteria are important in a specific type of writing, for instance, in a type of writing that asks students to narrate incidents that were in some way significant in their lives, to write a reports of information, or to evaluate a bicycle, a record album, or a poem.

The teachers who have participated in these training sessions have expanded their repertoire of ways in which they can evaluate and improve student writing. They can now evaluate

student performance in a specific type of writing by looking for the criteria that are central to that type. Consequently, when they edit student papers or train students how to edit one another's papers in workshops, they will be able to focus classroom instruction on criteria other than features that are generic to all types of writing, such as mechanical correctness, spelling, syntax, coherence, style. This is not to suggest that such focused instruction should be a substitution for the more traditional approach; rather, it is another approach that will enrich classroom activities.

The California Assessment Program wants to encourage districts to use these teachers as resources for workshops at the local level. CAP has provided each district with writing guides to be used in these workshops. For each type of writing being assessed, these writing guides include

- a discussion of that type of writing, analyzing its relationship to other kinds of writing and defining its main features
- sample assignments of the particular type.
- a record of one student's complete writing process with teacher commentary.
- exemplary student essays of that type.
- a published example with commentary.
- a list of reading selections as examples of that type of writing; these selections will be appropriate to the grade level being assessed.

--the scoring guide that will be used in the official assessment.

By giving teachers examples of the prompts, by making the scoring guides public, by providing sample essays, commentaries, and reading lists, CAP hopes to encourage districts to refine their programs so that they reflect the best of what we know about teaching writing. These writing guides will be a rich resource that will help classroom teachers develop their students' skills with specific types of writing.[1]

The Writing Development Team worked throughout 1986 to prepare for the first official assessment of grade 8 students to take place in April 1987. The California Assessment Program will use matrix sampling to assess how well grade 8 students can write Report of Information, Problem Solution, Evaluation, and Autobiographical Incident. Each grade 8 student in California will be given a prompt asking for one of these four types of writing. Individual scores will not be reported, on the assumption that one type of writing may prove more difficult than another. Rather, scores will be reported at the school site level to tell districts how well their students are doing with each type of writing and, subsequently, how well each type of writing is being taught.

In 1988, grade 11 or grade 12 students will be assessed in several of the following types of writing: Autobiographical Phase, Reflective Essay, Report of Information, Instances to Support Generalizations, Analysis--Speculation about Causes, Evaluation, Interpretation, Controversial Issue. A reconstituted

Peckham--10

Writing Development Team of thirty-two teachers will continue work on the high school assessment in order to develop the scoring guides and decide which types of writing will be tested first.

This kind of writing assessment represents a new direction for statewide assessment of student writing achievement. It is a giant step away from multiple-choice competency and toward real writing. It will furnish districts not only with data indicating their students' writing achievement in a particular school but also with specific information that teachers can use in order to improve that achievement. Most important, the CAP Direct Writing Assessment is emphasizing what good teachers know is basic to good writing. Consequently, they will not feel compromised when the CAP scores are used as a measure of how well they have taught to the test; they will know this is one test to which they can teach.

1. The Writing Assessment Handbook: Grade 8 can be ordered for \$10.00 plus tax by writing to

Bureau of Publication Sales
State Department of Education
P.O. Box 271
Sacramento, CA 95802-0271.

Checks should be made out to the California State Department of Education.

Bibliography

Britton, James., et.al. The Development of Writing Abilites (11-18). Urbana: NCTE, 1975.

Moffett, James, and Betty Wagner. student-centered language arts and reading, k-13. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

Moffett, James. Active Voice. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981.

Moffett, James, Miriam Baker, and Charles Cooper. Active Voices. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1986.

Abstract of
STATEWIDE DIRECT WRITING ASSESSMENT
IN CALIFORNIA
by
Irvin Peckham

This paper sketches the background of the previous objective assessment of student writing in California in order to explain why the California Assessment Program decided to initiate a Statewide Direct Writing Assessment. The paper describes the assessment that will not only look at actual student writing of all California eighth and twelfth graders, but will also evaluate various domains modeled from the theories of James Moffett and the research of James Britton. After a review of how a committee of California teachers selected the types of writing to be assessed, wrote the prompts, and designed the scoring guides unique to each type of writing, the paper concludes with an evaluation of the progress that has been made by the Direct Writing Assessment program and with a justification for using this kind of assessment as a way of influencing how teachers teach writing.